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Women Teachers on the Frontier

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Book Reviews

Women Teachers on the Frontier, by Polly Welts Kaufman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. xxiii, 270 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, appendixes, index. $22.50 cloth.

In the decade following 1846, the National Board of Popular Education recruited some six hundred single, experienced female teachers from Pennsylvania, New York, and New England; gave them special training at a six-week, tuition-free institute at Hartford; and sent them west to teach in frontier communities. Pledged to two years of service and with transportation paid by the board, most went into the states of the Old Northwest and Iowa, and a few also went south or to Oregon. While probably the best known, they were neither the first nor the last of their sex to heed the high calling to carry "learning" and Protestant evangelical religion to the two million children which Catherine Beecher estimated lacked schools.

Polly Welts Kaufman used the papers of the NBPE—now at the Connecticut Historical Society—to give us a new portrait of "frontier schoolmarms." Because they were willing to take unusual risks and because teaching was an acceptable profession for women, those who entered the calling were able to attain, almost unnoticed, an independence and a higher level of self-sufficiency than practically any other group of women in their time.

Kaufman's book is not the ordinary monograph. Its three sections include a superbly researched introductory essay; the spirited diary of Arozina Perkins who taught at Fort Des Moines and Fairfield, Iowa, in 1850–1851; and the letters of seven other midwestern teachers, together with the reminiscences of Mary Gray McLench, who, with four colleagues, braved the perils of the Isthmus of Panama to teach in Oregon. Included are several useful appendixes, one of which names and gives the vital statistics of 224 individual teachers. Two maps and a host of charming illustrations grace the text. Thus by commentary and documents, we learn about the social and economic backgrounds of these women, their motivations and aspirations, the impact of their instructors at the institute, and their lives and problems in the schools and communities of the West.

It was not simply a sense of Christian mission which pulled teachers into the West, although to be accepted by the board, one had to have experienced a personal conversion. There was also the "push" of economic need. Some, like Betsy Brownell, thought this concern "not inconsistent with the spirit of doing good" (14). In their applications to the board, many revealed that they were already on their own, self-supporting by necessity. Some were eldest daughters of large families or had lost one or both parents. Their prospects of economic support through marriage may have become dim, since the median age of teachers at Hartford was twenty-five and New England women were ordinarily marrying somewhat earlier. Others, like their male counterparts, were restless, seeking change and adventure. According to Kaufman, Iowa-bound Arozina Perkins viewed the West "as a kind of paradise where she could serve and suffer, and at the same time regain the freedom she remembered as a child in the Green Mountains of northern Vermont" (55). Whatever their motives, these women revealed in their writings a continuity of professionalism and a high level of education, whether formal or informal.

Their training at Hartford urged them to introduce the blackboard, spare the rod, censure as little as possible, and inspire students to morality and high ideals by the use of Bible readings and singing. Arozina noted that her class at the institute was reviewed and tested in spelling, music, algebra, physiology, and English composition. Training included daily calisthenics to strengthen bodies and to combat the idea that women were too delicate to pursue a serious education. Subjects for lectures ranged from western life and school government to insanity and problems of deaf mutes, and there were visits to schools and other public institutions. Near the end of their instruction, the young women wrote their autobiographies and received teaching assignments and final instructions from the superintendent. Then, with an escort for the first part of the trip (often William Slade, the former governor of Vermont), they began their western journey. As agent for the national board, Slade was charged with raising funds, recruiting women for the institute, and identifying frontier communities that wanted schoolmistresses. Like Nancy Swift, superintendent of ten classes, he was much beloved by the teachers.

Events did not always go according to plan. When she reached Fort Des Moines, Arozina Perkins found that she did not have a school. Undaunted, she started one of her own, but because of the competition of others and the poverty of her pupils' families, she could not make a living. In the face of hard economic reality and personal disappointment, her romantic vision of the West began to fade and to be replaced by despondency. But her last extant letter ends on a note of optimism,

shortly after she moved to Fairfield to teach in the seminary. Three years later the Massachusetts vital records registered her death in Marsfield. Whether she returned east because of illness, as was the case with several other teachers, or of disillusionment, or some other reason, is not clear.

Another pioneer Iowa teacher, Augusta E. Hubbell, returned home to New York shortly after arriving in Tipton, because of sickness and malicious gossip about her conduct. She evinced an interest in finding another situation to fulfill her obligation to the board, but one "near home," as "Mother is quite unwilling that I should go so far again" (160). Those who returned east seem to have been younger, with less teaching experience and stronger family ties (perhaps with both parents living) than those who remained in the West. About two-thirds of the group became permanent settlers, either continuing in the classroom or marrying and establishing families of their own. A few taught in small academies or seminaries where some of their female students were themselves preparing to become teachers. Others went to work in the newly developing social service professions.

Unlike the young male teachers, however, young "schoolmarms" did not find the schoolroom an avenue into the more highly respected professions of law, medicine, or the ministry. Yet they were independent spirits who established select or subscriptions schools when public ones folded, who declined to "board-around" even when trustees insisted, or who refused to sacrifice their religious principles to the universalists or "nothingarians," as Cynthia M. Bishop termed them in Lafayette, Indiana. The same Miss Bishop stoutly maintained that her $300 annual salary ($150 was the national board's recommended minimum) was "*too low*" and that she would not accept "so small a remuneration for so hard a place next year" (178).

All in all, Polly Kaufman presents a fascinating picture of what it was like to be a female teacher in an 1850s western community, especially when that society had some reservations about a woman being able to control mixed classes. In its depiction of young women with some control of their own destiny, her book is a refreshing antidote to recent excellent, but grim studies of wives of overland pioneers or prostitutes.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, URBANA-CHAMPAIGN MARY LEE SPENCE